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# INQUIRY

## Topic: KAL FLIGHT 007

Seymour Hersh, 49, is a Pulitzer Prize winning investigative reporter. He is the author of such books as *Chemical and Biological Warfare*, *My Lai 4*, *Cover-up*, and *The Price of Power*, a study of Henry Kissinger. His latest, *The Target is Destroyed*, examines the Soviets' shooting down of Korean Air Lines Flight 007, killing 269 people. He was interviewed by USA TODAY's Barbara Reynolds.



Seymour Hersh

## Both sides refuse to admit the truth

**USA TODAY:** According to your book, administration officials knew early on that the Soviets had shot down Korean Air Lines Flight 007 by mistake, but chose to conceal that information. Why would they do that?

**HERSH:** The administration chose, when confronted with a crisis, not to play it straight. In the beginning, I think, the senior people — George Shultz, the secretary of state, and William Casey, the head of the CIA — were convinced from the initial intelligence that the Soviet Union not only had shot down a plane, but knew it was a civilian passenger plane when they shot it down. That was an honest mistake in the first day, but by 24 to 36 hours after the event, the intelligence community was beginning to say the evidence is overwhelmingly clear that the Soviets had not known what they were doing. Nobody in our government chose to set the record straight.

**USA TODAY:** The Air Force did the best job it could in a very short time, then turned it over to the policymakers, according to Gen. James C. Pfautz, who also said he was disgusted by the way it was handled. Why?

**HERSH:** Air Force intelligence concluded right away, within about 12 hours, that

there had been an accident — the Soviet Union had not known what it was doing. And Pfautz, who was the head of intelligence, briefed this to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and everybody agreed that Pfautz had gotten a very good picture of the event, had done a terrific briefing.

**USA TODAY:** So why did the administration ignore that information?

**HERSH:** By the time Pfautz had done all of his work, the secretary of state had already gone public without checking with the Air Force or his intelligence people. So while Pfautz was working on this separate track and doing some very good reporting, the political people were treating it differently — as another event they could exploit.

**USA TODAY:** Are you saying their judgment was colored by their emotions?

**HERSH:** They were very angry at the Russians, and legitimately so, for killing those people. And everybody should be. Nobody's excusing the Russians for what they did in this. But there was no reason to accuse them of doing more than they did. What the Russians did was bad enough without suggesting that they had identified

the plane first, which Pfautz and others knew not to be true.

**USA TODAY:** How did you conclude that the KAL flight was not on a spying mission as the Soviets contend?

**HERSH:** These 747 jets are flown across the ocean with very sophisticated navigational systems that are absolutely accurate. But they have to be programmed. The wrong number was put in, and the pilot really never knew.

**USA TODAY:** Why wasn't there a backup system to alert the pilots that the plane was off course?

**HERSH:** You have to accept on faith in all of this that most pilots don't do everything they're supposed to do. For example, most 747 cockpits have three of these systems, and they're supposed to be independently programmed to avoid error. But, in fact, most airline pilots load up one, then they remote load the other two with the same information. In effect, they cut down on the redundancy and the chance to correct mistakes.

**USA TODAY:** How can you rule out the theory that Flight 007 wasn't on an intelligence gathering mission over the Soviet Union?

**HERSH:** If this was a spy plane, and it had been sent over Russia to activate radars and other things, we would have to have people in a position to pick up the signals. That's what the National Security Agency and the Air Force units in the Pacific do. I've talked to the people who were there. None of them had any clue in advance that that plane was going to be there. And there's no way you're going to send an intelligence plane into the Soviet Union without the people around who are supposed to monitor the intelligence it's supposed to trigger.

**USA TODAY:** Your book discusses the presence of Project CLEF, an intelligence station in Northern Japan, so secret that top Japanese leaders didn't know about it. Why couldn't it warn Washington the flight was in trouble?

**HERSH:** That base wasn't designed to do anything more than collect intelligence. Theoretically, the Japanese collected intelligence on the Russians in Northern Japan, but we wanted to collect our own. We